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The Efficacy of Collaborative Strategic Reading on the Reading Comprehension of ESP Learners

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Abstract

The present research set out to improve reading comprehension of ESP learners through CSR (collaborative strategic reading) which teaches reading comprehension strategies and provide opportunities for English language learners to interact effectively with peers. Forty students majoring in electronics of Islamic Azad university of Mahshahr were selected as the participants, and randomly divided into two groups of experimental and control. The participants in the experimental group were taught collaborative strategic reading through using reading strategies namely, previewing, click and clunk, get the gist and wrap-up collaboratively, while the control group received the same hours of instruction through translation. Having received the instruction, an independent samples t-test was made to find possible differences between the two groups. The results were indicative of the effective role of collaborative strategic reading on the reading comprehension of EFL learners.

Key words: Collaborative strategic reading; Reading comprehension; ESP

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is amongst the most prominent skills that EFL learners should learn. The idea of creating meaning and constructing knowledge from the text is commonly referred to as reading comprehension. According to Tankersley, (2003), we do not comprehend unless we make connections and are able to process the words that we read at the thinking level.

Although it is believed that reading is enhanced through practice, specialists (Zamel, 1992; Brown, 2001) argued that efficient reading can be taught to learners. Research also showed that when teachers present content area text strategically and effectively, students find it easier to learn the material and are more likely to transfer the strategies modeled by the teacher (Day & Elksin, 1994, cited in Standish, 2005). Therefore, teachers should provide students with active and selective use of comprehension strategies. Reading comprehension strategy can be defined as "a cognitive or behavioral action that is enacted under particular contextual conditions with the goal of improving some aspects of comprehension" (Graesser, A. C., 2007, p.6).

Reading in an ESP context is prone to many problems. Frequently, readers are held up by problems of vocabulary, grammar and comprehension. To the researcher's best knowledge, in Iran, the students are accustomed to simplified texts at pre-university level but at the university level they are exposed to the textbooks which they find difficult. As a result, the strategies that they use are the intensive use of the bilingual dictionary and translation. In this regard, Farhady (2006) asserted that the activities and exercises in the ESP Iranian textbooks do not give learners a sense of achievement in terms of the reading skill. The available findings in this area reveal that emphasizing on reading based on traditional approaches has been the source of new problems. What we lack is an appropriate method or set of activities to lead students towards the required skills to satisfy their objectives. Hence, the

present study plays a key role in exploring the nature of CSR (collaborative strategic reading) to teach reading comprehension.

REVIWE OF THE LITERATURE

Since 1960s, ESP has gone through different developmental stages. During the 60s and 70s, the need for ESP grew out of the global expansion of scientific, technical and economic activities and the focus of instruction concentrated on the lexical and grammatical characteristics of academic registers at the sentence level (Dudley-Evans &St. John, 1998).

During the last decades, research has examined the processes and efficacy of CSR (collaborative strategic reading) in heterogeneous classes which included students with learning disabilities and students acquiring English as a second language (Klinger & Vaughn, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000). CSR is created to enhance students' comprehension of text. Specifically, it is designed to teach and activate reading comprehension strategies. In this regard, students work in collaborative groups with defined roles to engage in reading.

It is important to know that CSR is based on Vygotsky' (1978) theories of learning and social constructivism (Rumerlhart & Ortony, 1977, cited in Standish, 2005). Hoover (1996) defined social constructivism as a theory that humans construct their own learning by building new knowledge upon old. As Standish (2005) stated, CSR reflects this belief as students initiate the comprehension strategies in small collaborative groups of four or five. Learning takes place in a cooperative format where students complete shared goals while taking a significant role within the group. Research also, found that in CSR, students are actively involved in information gathering and meaning making through their ongoing experiences with the members of their group, students construct knowledge about the text in a social environment (Wadsworth, 1989, cited in Standish, 2005).

Klinger and Voughn (1999) stated that CSR was developed from reciprocal teaching and includes the following strategies: preview, click and clunk (fix-it-strategies), get the gist (main idea) and wrap-up (summarizing and questioning strategies). These strategies are implemented in collaborative groups. When students understand the material, it is said they are "clicking". If students experience difficulty comprehending the material, they are "clunking". In this regard, they use "fix-up-strategies to determine meaning (Hichcock, Kurki, Wilkins, et al., 2009).

Implementing CSR in EFL Reading Comprehension Classes

1. Preview

The first strategy associated with CSR is previewing which means activating prior knowledge and predicting. It occurs prior to reading and consists of making prediction, connecting to prior knowledge and associations with the text, generating interest and encouraging active reading of the text.

2. Click and clunk

These two strategies are associated with self-monitoring. According to Klinger and Voughn (2000), as you read, you may comprehend the text and meaning of the words which is called "clicking" or you may bump into a word that you don't know what it means that is called "clunking". Hence, students should be taught to look for key ideas to help them figure out the word or read sentences before and after clunks to make sure they can figure out what it means.

3. Get the gist

This strategy is of primary importance for the EFL students who need to extract specific information from a text. During this process, students quickly read each paragraph or section to find the main ideas or summarize key information and message.

4. Wrap-up

The last stage of CSR is wrap-up strategy which is generating and answering questions about what they have read, and summarizing key ideas presented in the text.

It is believed that in Iranian EFL contexts, receptive skills need more attention and should be explicitly activated. The aforementioned studies provide enough information in relation to reading and reading strategies; however, they do not focus on reading strategies specifically. In addition, they do not provide detailed information on whether these strategies need teaching in EFL.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The present study seeks to answer the following question:

Does collaborative strategic reading improve reading comprehension of EFL learners?

METHOD

Participants

Participants of this study were 2nd year students of Islamic Azad university of Mahshahr majoring in electronics. They were all native speakers of Persian, ranging from twenty to thirty-two years of age.

Instrumentation

The instruments utilized in this study were as follows:

1-To determine the homogeneity of the participants, a standard proficiency test was administered. The test included 100 questions, 40 items of grammar, 40 vocabulary items and 4 reading comprehension passages each with 5 questions.

2-The pretest was a reading comprehension test. It

consisted of 5 reading comprehension passages with 25 multiple-choice questions.

3-The posttest which contained 5 reading comprehension passages followed by 25 multiple-choice questions. The pretest and posttest were the same length and from the same source.

Procedure

To accomplish the purpose of the study, the following procedure was followed. Beginning the research, a standard sample proficiency test was given to 60 the electronic engineering students of Islamic Azad university of Mahshahr to ensure the homogeneity of the participants. Then, 40 students were selected as the participants that were randomly divided into two groups, the experimental and the control. In the control group, the instructor used translation and students began to translate the passages into Persian. While, the students in the experimental group received reading instruction through some successful strategies, i.e. previewing, click and clunk, get the gist, and wrap-up collaboratively. Initially, the participants in the experimental group were trained strategies in a whole class setting. After students had developed proficiency using the strategies, the teacher then assigned them to collaborative learning groups (approximately four students per group) in which each student played a critical role associated with the implementation of the strategies. Then, a reading passage was presented by the teacher. Prior to reading passage, students previewed the text to determine what they knew and what they were going to learn. They were also trained to recognize when they could comprehend the material and when they couldn't. In this case, they were told understanding material means the concepts are "clicking" and having difficulty comprehending means "clunking". As a result, during clunking, they used "fix-up" strategy to determine meaning that was though contextual clues, guessing, and using background knowledge. Then, they used "get the gist" strategy to get the main ideas. In this regard, students were told to read the passage quickly without stopping to get the important concepts. The last strategy was generating questions and summarizing the text in which they were prompted to summarize what they had already read by focusing on main ideas. During the sessions, students in the experimental group were asked to refrain from using dictionaries in the class during the experiment. At first, they resented this, and wanted to look up unfamiliar words. Gradually, they began to rely more on vocabulary recognition strategies.

Data Analysis

The efficacy of collaborative strategic reading on the reading comprehension of ESP students was investigated by using pretest-posttest group design. A pretest was given to both groups of experimental and comparison groups before the treatment. During the experiment, students in the control group received the conventional method of reading comprehension, that is, the teacher introduced the new words and phrases, and the students began to translate passages into Persian and answer the traditional comprehension questions. For the experimental, the same passages were taught by the teacher using collaborative strategic reading. Finally, an independent t-test was used to check if there was any significant difference between the experimental and control groups.

Results and Findings

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics Showing the Mean of the Experimental and the Control Groups in the Pretest

Group	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std. Error. Mean
Experimental	20	15.05	2.460	.55
Control	20	15.00	2.630	.58

Table 1 indicates the descriptive statistics of the experimental and the control group in the pretest. As shown in the table, the mean and standard deviation of the experimental group are 15.05, 2.460, respectively, and the control group 15.00, 2.630. To check if this mean difference is significant, an independent t-test was conducted (see table 2).

Table 2

Independent Samples t-test Comparing the Pre-test Mean of the Experimental and Control Groups

	Levene' Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig	T	df	Sig.(2- tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	.097	.757	.062	38	.951	-.050	.806
Equal variances not assumed			.062	37.820	.951	-.050	.806

As table 2 indicates, (t (38) =.062; p=.951), it can be concluded that there is not any significant difference between the experimental and control group before the instruction. In other words, the two groups were homogeneous before the instruction and the test distribution was normal.

Based on the results of table 3, the mean and standard deviation of the experimental group in the posttest are 18, 2.224, respectively, and the control group 15.45, 2.523. To check if this mean difference is significant, an independent

t-test was conducted (see table 4).

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics Showing the Mean of the Experimental and the Control Groups in the Posttest

Group	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std.Error. Mean
Experimental	20	18	2.224	.49
Control	20	15.45	2.523	.56

Table 4
Independent Samples t-test Comparing the Posttest Mean of the Experimental and Control Groups

	Levene' Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig	T	df	Sig.(2- tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	.637	.430	3.390	38	.002	2.550	.752
Equal variances not assumed			3.390	37.412	.002	2.550	.752

Based on the results, (t(38)=3.390 ; p<.05). As a result, there is a remarkable difference between the experimental and control group which confirmed the importance of reading strategies on Iranian university students' ESP reading comprehension.

The research question in the present study was directed toward investigating the probable difference in reading comprehension of students who received collaborative strategic reading and those who did not. In order to address the research question, the descriptive statistics of the two groups were examined. The results of the pretest and posttest were indicative of the effective role of collaborative strategic reading on the reading comprehension of ESP learners.

CONCLUSION

The effect of collaborative strategic reading was supported by many researchers (Hichcock, Kurki, Wilkins, Dimino, Gersten, 2009; Voughn & Klinger 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000; Standish, 2005). The major aim of the current research was to improve reading comprehension of Iranian engineering students by equipping them with proper reading strategies and techniques in collaborative groups. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the experimental group that received collaborative strategic reading and control group that used grammar-translation method in reading a text. It was based on the idea that when students need to be taught reading strategies to improve their reading comprehension. Moreover, when students work in groups, they have the opportunity to contribute to the group's understanding of the text.

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